

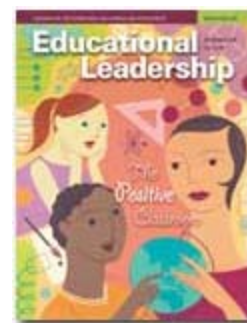


The Power of Our Words

Teacher language influences students' identities as learners.
Five principles keep that influence positive.

Paula Denton

Think back to your childhood and recall the voices of your teachers. What kinds of words did they use? What tone of voice? Recall how you felt around those teachers. Safe and motivated to learn? Or self-doubting, insecure, even angry?



September 2008

Teacher language—what we say to students and how we say it—is one of our most powerful teaching tools. It permeates every aspect of teaching. We cannot teach a lesson, welcome a student into the room, or handle a classroom conflict without using words. Our language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.

How Language Shapes Learners

From my 25 years of teaching and my research on language use, I've learned that language actually *shapes* thoughts, feelings, and experiences. (Vygotsky, 1978). Our words shape students as learners by

- *Affecting students' sense of identity.* Five-year-old Don loves to sing but isn't good at it—yet. His music teacher says, "Let's have you move to the back row and try just mouthing the words." Such language can lead Don to believe not only that he is a bad singer, but also that he will always be a bad singer. But suppose the teacher says, "Don, you really love to sing, don't you? Would you like to learn more about it? I have some ideas." Such words support Don's budding identity as one who loves to sing and is learning singing skills.
- *Helping students understand how they work and play.* For example, an educator might comment on a student's writing by saying, "These juicy adjectives here give me a wonderful sense of how your character looks and feels." Naming a specific attribute—the use of adjectives—alerts the writer to an important strength in her writing and encourages her to build on that strength.
- *Influencing our relationships with students.* To a student who—once again—argued with classmates at recess, we might say either "Emory, if you don't stop it, no more recess!" or "Emory, I saw you arguing with Douglas and Stephen. Can you help me understand what happened from your point of view?" The former would reinforce a teacher-student relationship based on teacher threats and student defensiveness, whereas the latter would begin to build a teacher-student relationship based on trust.

Five Guiding Principles for Positive Language

How can we ensure that our language supports students' learning and helps create a positive, respectful community? During the 20 years I've been involved with the Responsive Classroom, I have found this approach to be a good base for using language powerfully. The Responsive Classroom approach, developed by Northeast Foundation for Children, offers language strategies that enable elementary teachers to help students succeed academically and socially. Strategies range from asking open-ended questions that stretch students' thinking to redirecting students when behavior goes off-track. These strategies are based on the following five general principles.

1. Be Direct

When we say what we mean and use a kind, straightforward tone, students learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, a necessary condition for developing self-discipline and taking the risks required for learning.

It's easy to slip into using indirect language as a way to win compliance. For example, as a new teacher, I tried to get students to do what I wanted by pointing out what I liked about other students' behavior. "I like the way May and Justine are paying attention," I would cheerfully announce while impatiently eyeing Dave and Marta fooling around in the corner.

When this strategy worked, it was because students mimicked the desired behavior so that they, too, would win praise from me, not because I had helped them develop self-control or internal motivation. And often, when I pointed out how I liked certain learners' behavior, the rest of the class ignored me. If I liked the way May and Justine were paying attention, that was nice for the three of us, but it had nothing to do with the rest of the class, who had more compelling things to do at the moment.

Moreover, comparative language can damage students' relationships. By holding May and Justine up as exemplars, I implied that the other class members were less commendable. This can drive a wedge between students.

Later in my career, I learned to speak directly. To call the students to a meeting, for example, I rang a chime to gain their attention (a signal we practiced regularly), then said firmly, "Come to the meeting rug and take a seat now." To Dave and Marta in the previous example, I'd say, "It's time to listen now." The difference in students' response was remarkable.

Sarcasm, another form of indirect language, is also common—and damaging—in the classroom. Sometimes teachers use sarcasm because we think it will provide comic relief; other times we're just tired, and it slips in without our even knowing it. If a teacher says, "John, what part of 'Put your phone away' don't you understand?" students will likely laugh, and the teacher may think she has shown that she's hip and has a sense of humor. But John will feel embarrassed, and his trust in this teacher will diminish. The position of this teacher may shift in the other students' eyes as well: They no longer see her as an authority who protects their emotional safety but as someone who freely uses the currency of insult. Much better to simply say, "John, put your phone away." If he doesn't, try another strategy, such as a logical consequence.

2. Convey Faith in Students' Abilities and Intentions

When our words and tone convey faith in students' desire and ability to do well, students are more likely to live up to our expectations of them.

"When everyone is ready, I'll show you how to plant the seeds." "You can look at the chart to

remind yourself of our ideas for good story writing." "Show me how you will follow the rules in the hall." These teacher words, spoken in a calm voice, communicate a belief that students want to—and know how to—listen, cooperate, and do good work. This increases the chance that students will see themselves as respectful listeners, cooperative people, and competent workers, and behave accordingly.

Take the time to notice and comment on positive behavior, being quite specific: "You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence." Such observations give students hard evidence for why they should believe in themselves.

3. Focus on Actions, Not Abstractions

Because elementary-age children tend to be concrete thinkers, teachers can communicate most successfully with them by detailing specific actions that will lead to a positive environment. For example, rather than saying, "Be respectful," it's more helpful to state, "When someone is speaking during a discussion, the rest of us will listen carefully and wait until the speaker is finished before raising our hands to add a comment."

Sometimes it's effective to prompt students to name concrete positive behaviors themselves. To a student who has trouble focusing during writing time, a teacher might say matter-of-factly, "What will help you think of good ideas for your story and concentrate on writing them down?" The student might then respond, "I can find a quiet place to write, away from my friends."

There is a place, of course, for such abstract terms as *respectful* and *responsible*, but we must give students plenty of opportunities to associate those words with concrete actions. Classroom expectations such as "treat one another with kindness" will be more meaningful to students if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

Focusing on action also means pointing to the desired *behavior* rather than labeling the learner's character or attitude. I had a student who chronically did poor work when he could do better. In a moment of frustration, I said to him, "I don't think you even care!" This allowed me to vent, but it did nothing to help the student change. His energy went toward defending himself against my negative judgment, not toward examining and changing his behavior. Worse, such language can lead students to accept our judgment and believe that they indeed don't care.

It's more helpful in such situations to issue a positive challenge that names the behavior we want: "Your job today is to record five observations of our crickets. Think about what you'll need to do before you start." This moves the focus to what the student can do.

4. Keep It Brief

It's hard for many young children to follow long strings of words like this:

When you go out to recess today, be sure to remember what we said about including everyone in games, because yesterday some kids had an issue with not being included in kickball and four square, and we've talked about this. You were doing really well for a while there, but lately it seems like you're getting kind of careless, and that's got to change or ...

By the end of this spiel, many students would be thinking about other things. Few could follow the entire explanation. Students understand more when we speak less. Simply asking, "Who can tell us one way to include everyone at recess?" gives them an opportunity to remind themselves of positive behaviors. If you have taught and led students in practicing the class's expectations for recess, students will make good use of such a reminder.

5. Know When to Be Silent

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of words. When teachers use silence, we open a space for students to think, rehearse what to say, and sometimes gather the courage to speak at all.

We can see the benefit of silence if, after asking a question, we pause before taking responses from students. Researchers have found that when teachers wait three to five seconds, more students respond, and those responses show higher-level thinking (Swift & Gooding, 1983; Tobin, 1980).

Three to five seconds can feel uncomfortably long at first. But if we stick to it—and model thoughtful pausing by waiting a few seconds ourselves to respond to students' comments—we'll set a pace for the entire classroom that will soon feel natural. Our reward will be classroom conversations of higher quality.

Remaining silent allows us to listen to students and requires us to resist the impulse to jump in and correct students' words or finish their thoughts. A true listener tries to understand a speaker's message before formulating a response. When we allow students to speak uninterrupted and unhurried, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge.

In my current role teaching educators Responsive Classroom strategies, I watch teachers incorporate these five principles of language into their daily communications with students, and I see them build classrooms where students feel safe, respected, and engaged. By paying attention to our language, we can use it to open the doors of possibility for students.

References

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Author's note: A 2006 study by Sara Rimm-Kaufman and colleagues at the University of Virginia showed that Responsive Classroom practices were associated with students having higher reading and math test scores, better social skills, and more positive feelings about school. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences has awarded Rimm-Kaufman a \$2.9 million grant to further investigate how Responsive Classroom practices contribute to gains in students' math achievement.

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